

Singapore

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Freedom of the Press

Although the overall media environment in Singapore remained largely unchanged in 2013, the introduction of new licensing requirements for news websites—ostensibly to bring regulation of online outlets in line with that of print and broadcast media—drew international attention and significant pushback from bloggers, who quickly mobilized under the hashtag #FreeMyInternet. A coalition of news and social-media sites released a joint statement expressing concerns that the new licensing regime would negatively affect the diversity of information available to Singaporeans online.

Freedoms of speech and expression are guaranteed by Article 14 of the constitution, but there are restrictions on these rights. The Newspapers and Printing Presses Act, the Defamation Act, the Internal Security Act (ISA), and articles in the penal code allow the authorities to block the circulation of news deemed to incite violence, arouse racial or religious tensions, interfere in domestic politics, or threaten public order, the national interest, or national security. The Sedition Act, in effect since the colonial period, outlaws seditious speech, the distribution of seditious materials, and acts with “seditious tendency.”

Parliament has been dominated by the People’s Action Party (PAP) since 1959, and ruling party members are quick to use harsh civil and criminal defamation laws to silence and bankrupt political opponents and critical media outlets. With bloggers and online discussion groups increasingly offering alternative views and a virtual channel for expressing dissent, the government has begun to crack down on postings it deems offensive.

The judiciary lacks independence and systematically returns verdicts in the government’s favor. Journalists and other commentators who raise questions regarding judicial impartiality are vulnerable to charges of “scandalizing the judiciary,” an offense similar to contempt of court. In April 2013, police arrested political cartoonist Leslie Chew for alleged sedition after he published four cartoons on his Facebook page that satirized politicized rulings by Singaporean courts. The police, who confiscated his computer, phone, and passport, claimed they were responding to an anonymous reader complaint. In July, prosecutors brought contempt-of-court charges against Chew in the same case. All charges were dropped after Chew agreed to publicly apologize and take down the cartoons and related reader comments from his site.

Singapore has no freedom of information law, and attempts by opposition legislators to introduce such a bill have not been successful.

Annual licensing requirements for all media outlets and internet service providers have been used to inhibit criticism of the government. Websites offering political or religious content are required to register with the Media Development Authority (MDA), and a website’s owners and editors are criminally liable for any content that the government finds objectionable. Under new regulations that took effect in June 2013, any news website posting an average of at least one Singapore-related news article per week over two months, and with at least 50,000 unique viewers per month over the same period, must apply for an individual license at the cost of S\$50,000 (US\$40,000). At least 10 websites currently fall under the new guidelines. Although the MDA initially said that individuals expressing personal views on their own blogs would not be subject to the licensing fees, it later qualified its remarks, stating that if blogs “take on the nature of news sites, we will take a closer look and evaluate them accordingly.”

The new regulations also oblige website owners to remove “prohibited content”—as defined under the Internet Code of Practice—within 24 hours after being notified by the MDA. Any websites that do not comply with the conditions may be fined or suspended. The MDA suggested that the licensing regime could be extended to foreign news sites covering Singapore news. It defended the regulations as a necessary measure to protect “the social fabric and national interests” of Singapore and restrict content that “incites racial or religious hatred; misleads and causes mass panic; or advocates or promotes violence.” Foreign media are also subject to pressures and restrictive laws such as the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act, and are required by the Ministry of Information, Communications, and the Arts to post bond and appoint a local legal representative if they wish to publish in Singapore.

Films, television programs, music, books, and magazines are sometimes censored; all films with a political purpose are banned unless sponsored by the government. The majority of print and broadcast journalists practice self-censorship to avoid defamation charges or other legal repercussions. In his controversial 2012 book *OB Markers: My Straits Times Story*, former Singapore Press Holdings editor in chief Cheong Yip Seng documented the ever-shifting markers of what is considered “OB,” or “out of bounds,” by authorities. Coverage of sensitive socioeconomic and political topics has typically been less restricted online.

Journalists can generally gather news freely and without harassment. Cases of physical attacks against members of the press are extremely rare, and none were reported in 2013.

Nearly all print and broadcast media outlets, internet service providers, and cable television services are owned or controlled by the state or by companies with close ties to the PAP. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) World Service is the only completely independent radio outlet available in the country. Satellite television is forbidden. A substantial variety of foreign newspapers and magazines are distributed uncensored, but the government is authorized to limit the circulation of print editions. About 73 percent of the population used the internet in 2013.

2014 Scores

Press Status

Not Free

Press Freedom Score

(0 = best, 100 = worst)

67

Legal Environment

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

24

Political Environment

(0 = best, 40 = worst)

Economic Environment

(0 = best, 30 = worst)